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## **Bosnia-Herzegovina: Domestic Agency and the Inadequacy of the Liberal Peace**

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This chapter discusses the controversial impact of the liberal peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia). Despite a massive international commitment, or perhaps because of it, Bosnia since the end of the war in 1995 has evolved towards a situation characterized by presence of internationally supported domestic institutions with limited local legitimacy. Rather than endorsing the various tenets of the liberal peace, Bosnians have increasingly protested against what many of them consider a failed statebuilding effort unable to meet their economic, political, social and cultural needs. This chapter traces this failure in three steps: it highlights the emergence of “spaces of agency” among civil society organizations and cultural groups and institutions which has long been overlooked, it explains how dissatisfaction has spread to involve economic and social issues and, finally, how international liberal agents have turned into the primary defenders of a political and economic system which preserves only a facade of liberalism.

## Introduction

It has long been argued that Bosnians are apathetic, apolitical and not capable of or willing to bring about political change. The international community has often accused Bosnians of being inert<sup>1</sup> emphasising how citizens could positively impact upon the local political process through the elections, but have often failed to do so. However, as this chapter shows, often-overlooked processes of political mobilisation have taken place in Bosnia-Herzegovina, because of, or perhaps in spite of, a system based on international tutelage. Cultural and social movements of resistance have existed in the country for some time, but were barely channelled into official political processes. Such movements, as we argue, have laid the foundations for a wave of high-profile protests in many Bosnian towns in February 2014. These protests testify to Bosnian citizens' attempt to reclaim their agency and suggest alternatives of how their economic, political and social needs can be met. Both popular protests and bottom-up proposals have faced mixed responses on the part of the international community. In fact, the protest movements have forced international actors to rethink the role of Bosnian citizens in the peace- and state-building jigsaw, while at the same time clinging firmly to established top-down mechanisms of intervention. It is through the interaction between such competing processes that we can see the potential emergence of a post-liberal peace, which, however, is still carrying the burden of two decades of intervention.

This chapter takes an insider-outsider perspective in that one of the authors has been involved in the protest movement himself. These insider-experiences are complemented through interviews as well as a long-standing engagement with international peacebuilding on the part of all authors. We have seen the recent protests as a fundamental change to previous patterns of political apathy as well as the ways in which the 'everyday' is politicised.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, we acknowledge the continuities of international intervention, linked to the power of the state. We see these interactions as

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<sup>1</sup>Jukic, Elvira (2012), "Report Highlights Young Bosnians' Political Apathy", Balkan Insight, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/young-bosnians-mistrust-politics-but-lack-initiative> (accessed 02 May 2014).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Ley, David. "Transnationalspaces and everydaylives". *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 29, no.2 (2004): 151–164.

particularly relevant in our analysis of agency that responds to the inadequacy of the 'Liberal Peace'.<sup>3</sup>

### **Political agency in Bosnia-Herzegovina**

With respect to local agency, the assessment of Bosnians as "apathetic" does not take into account the recent political history of the country, the disempowering role of the international community, as well as the presence of significant agencies and activities concentrated outside of the public sphere.

To begin with, the first experience of mass-scale protests played an important role in depressing public political participation for years to come. It took place shortly after the country's authoritarian regime was replaced by a democratic one, and at a time when Yugoslavia started to crumble. A series of demonstrations for peace were held in this period gathering an unprecedented number of people.<sup>4</sup> The protests culminated on 5 April 1992, when approximately 100,000 people assembled in Sarajevo in front of the BiH Parliament demanding peace. Sniper shots were fired at protesters, introducing the siege of the city and the cataclysm, which was to engulf the entire country for three and a half years. This traumatic experience has left a mark of deep frustration in the memory of Bosnian people by sending a message that the public is powerless when faced with the agenda of political elites.<sup>5</sup> Both the conflict which ensued and the post-conflict years dominated by nationalist politics have served to engrain this message in the memory of all citizens, and to restrict them to a voting body prey to manipulation by political elites. The fact that most jobs in the bloated civil service depend on political connections and patronage contributes significantly to passivity.

Second, strong interventionism by the international community until 2006 left only minimal space for grassroots initiatives and consultations with local actors, and thus obstructed citizens' activism. This heavy-handed approach achieved some short-term positive results and led key international actors to perceive BiH as a successful liberal

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<sup>3</sup>Mac Ginty R (2011), *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace*. London: Palgrave.

<sup>4</sup>In 1991 the protests for peace have culminated in 'YUTEL zamir – YUTEL for peace', a concert organized by the pan-Yugoslav TV station YUTEL. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx2HI0xelil>, Accessed on 4 September, 2014.

<sup>5</sup>Ljubica Spaskovska, "Landscapes of Resistance, Hope, and Loss: Yugoslav Supra-Nationalism and Anti-Nationalism," in Bojan Bilić & Vesna Janković, eds., *Resisting the Evil: (Post-) Yugoslav Anti-War Continuation*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2012, p. 58. For a good discussion of anti-war activism in the former Yugoslavia and its legacy, see Bojan Bilić, *We Were Gasping for Air*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2012.

peacebuilding project.<sup>6</sup> The resulting reduced role of the international community after 2006 allowed the defects of the liberal peacebuilding to surface. The stalemate which has characterised BiH ever since confirms the limitations of international intervention, which has been almost exclusively focused on issues relevant for the interveners themselves, such as economic and political liberalization, with local voices reduced to artificially-created non-governmental organisations (NGOs).<sup>7</sup>

Third, the assessment of the Bosnian population as “apathetic” is based on the assumption that political mobilisation happens in public spheres and visibly increases its energy over time. In the social movement literature, a number of reasons have been brought forward of why people protest, such as grievances, efficacy, identification, emotions and social embeddedness. However, what the bulk of social movement theory has long been doing is to analyse the phenomenon from a rational choice perspective<sup>8</sup> as well as focusing on the clearly visible manifestations of grievances and associated protest movements. The more hiddenspheres of social mobilisation have not been sufficiently investigated in their ability to code and disguise agency in contexts where open protest may seem inappropriate or even dangerous. This is based on the insight that bigger social movements often emerge from hidden networks.<sup>9</sup> Particularly in a context such as in BiH, with a history of socialism and a risk of censorship, the public sphere has not always been the primary field of resistance. Some even ascribe this to the tendency of the Ottoman Empire to avoid building public spaces, at least outside mosques,<sup>10</sup> which can be said to disincentivise open gatherings and publicly visible protest. Against this background, the vocalisation of grievances on the part of the population has traditionally not focused on public protest, but has taken on a coded form in alternative circles. A number of informal or alternative spaces and venues have been in existence for some time. These spaces had served as microcosms of protest where political discourses countering the elites had emerged. Above all, cultural spaces and youth centres are particularly noteworthy as alternative arenas, and are discussed below.

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<sup>6</sup>Tarik Lazović, 'Christian Schwarz-Schillingotkriva: BiH bi se raspala da janisam 2008. godine spriječio zatvaranje OHR-a', *Dnevni avaz*, 13 March, 2011.

<sup>7</sup>Roberto Belloni, “Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol.38, no.2, 2001, pp.163-180.

<sup>8</sup>Melissa Leach and Ian Scoones (2007), “Mobilising Citizens: Social Movements and the Politics of Knowledge”, IDS WORKING PAPER 276, p. 11; available at [http://w.drc-citizenship.org/system/assets/1052734544/original/1052734544-leach\\_etal.2007-mobilising.pdf](http://w.drc-citizenship.org/system/assets/1052734544/original/1052734544-leach_etal.2007-mobilising.pdf) (accessed 26 June 2014).

<sup>9</sup>Bettina Koehler and Markus Wissen (2003), “Glocalizing Protest: Urban Conflicts and Global Social Movements”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* Volume 27(4), p. 947.

<sup>10</sup>Confidential source, personal interview, Sarajevo, 06/09/13.

## 1. Making space for change: The hidden histories of protest

To begin with, cultural spaces have a particular standing in BiH. This has to be seen in the context of the former Yugoslavia, in which culture was thriving. Even during the war and the siege of Sarajevo, the city enjoyed a vibrant cultural life, staging performances, exhibitions and other arts projects.<sup>11</sup> Theatres were full during the war as they also served as escape shelters from the atrocities happening in the city.<sup>12</sup> Such dynamics have sown the seeds for cultural spaces acting as arenas where political discourses could be exchanged. This went hand in hand with the need of citizens to establish some kind of normality in their everyday lives in the chaos and abnormality of a wartime situation.<sup>13</sup>

This effort to establish, maintain and develop some sort of “free zones” detached from but at the same time in constant relation with the official public sphere dominated by nationalist categories continued in the post-war period. For instance, the Duplex Gallery in Sarajevo moved in 2013, but was before in a location that was hard to find. This was a deliberate decision of the owner, not least as he viewed the gallery as a ‘space of resistance’ to challenge the ‘system’, that is, the system in which internationals engage with and fund Bosnian actors.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, although this is an arts gallery in the first place, it is quite common to find a variety of people around the gallery discussing politics, including issues of social justice and the future of BiH. Such debates are deliberately kept away from the formal political sphere, which is often perceived as corrupt and thus not worthy of serious debate. Instead, discussions in the backyards of public areas, such as the one in which the Duplex Gallery was located, have seemed to absorb the energy, which has long appeared to be missing in public debates. In that sense, although it may be counterintuitive to perceive an art gallery as a space of concrete politics, these alternative spaces have been able to re-politicise the everyday challenges as they arise in a peacebuilding context.

Along similar lines, theatres have become increasingly socially active. Again, this is not least due to the crucial role that drama played during the siege of Sarajevo, including, for instance, the staging of “Waiting for Godot”, linked with the visit of Susan Sontag in 1993. Interestingly enough, the same play was staged again in 2009 under the auspices of

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<sup>11</sup>C. Zelizer (2003) ‘The role of artistic processes in peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina’, *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 10(2), p. 66.

<sup>12</sup>Aida Pilav, Pozoriste Mladih Sarajevo, personal interview, Sarajevo, 31/03/10. See also Asja Mandić, “The Formation of a Culture of Critical Resistance in Sarajevo: Exhibitions In/On Ruins,” *Third Text*, 25 (6), 2011, pp. 725-735.

<sup>13</sup>Macek, Ivana (2009), *Sarajevo Under Siege. Anthropology in Wartime*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

<sup>14</sup>Interview with owner, Sarajevo, 23/04/10.

the East-West Theatre.<sup>15</sup> One may interpret this as an attempt to demonstrate that, as much as people had been waiting for the war to end in 1993, in 2009 many were waiting for this particular kind of peace to end as well. Similarly, the Sarajevski Ratni Teatar (Sarajevo War Theatre) hosts a number of politically engaged performances and exhibitions, such as the 2013 production “Bio je lijep i sunčan dan”, a collection of Sarajevans’ stories about the siege. Such plays encourage people to reflect on their past and the ways in which it relates to the present. Interestingly, the theatre also hosts the ‘Open University’, a platform for public debate in the absence of public space in the country,<sup>16</sup> where some of the most burning political issues have been discussed. While it may go too far to suggest that theatres thus have become platforms of politics, it can be argued that they encourage critical reflection, which may or may not translate into political action.

In addition to cultural spaces, youth centres are another example in which political mobilisation has taken place beyond the reach of formal politics. On the one hand, the audiences of youth centres are limited not only in terms of age, but also in terms of attracting a particular type of young people who are said to be more ‘alternative’. As a result it has been difficult for the centres to increase their outreach into wider communities.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, as the example of the OKC Abrašević in Mostar shows, the goal is not necessarily to represent or reach out into society as a whole but, according to one of the centre coordinators, to “create a micro-society.”<sup>18</sup> In that respect, a form of political mobilisation takes place, which is fundamentally different from mainstream politics in its approach and direction. Indeed, the president of the youth council in Srebrenica has emphasised that she would not want to be a politician as with the youth centre she has a different way of bringing about change. In this regard, the centre is a space of resistance in which alternatives can be politically developed and in which people “can think and fight.”<sup>19</sup> This is similar to the OKC Abrašević, which is deliberately placed on the front lines to avoid being categorised as part of one or the other community. Unsurprisingly, one of the Mostar plenums, which followed from the numerous acts of resistance in Bosnian towns in February 2014 (further discussed below), took place in the

<sup>15</sup>Carter, Imogen (2009), “Desperately thanking Susan”, *The Observer*, 5 April. <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/apr/05/susan-sontag-godot-sarajevo-bosnia> (accessed 26/09/14).

<sup>16</sup>Malagic, Medina (2013), “Start of Open University Sarajevo in Beginning of December”, *Independent Balkan News Agency*. <http://www.balkan.eu.com/start-open-university-sarajevo-beginning-december/> (accessed 26/09/14).

<sup>17</sup>Goran Bubalo, personal interview, Sarajevo, 02/09/13.

<sup>18</sup>Personal interview, Mostar, 05/09/13.

<sup>19</sup>Milena Nikolic, personal interview, Srebrenica, 02/04/10

OKC Abrasevic, while the first Sarajevo plenum was held on the premises of the student radio at the university. Without identifying any causal link, it is nonetheless intriguing to ask to what extent these seemingly non-political spaces have acted as drivers of political mobilisation in 2014.

Hence, while formal politics have long been based on the separation and division of communities along ethnic lines, these centres have acted as microcosms of an almost pan-Yugoslav nostalgia.<sup>20</sup> The centres have brought together and mobilised young people beyond the nationalist discourses to create the basic stepping-stones for cooperation along common interests, whether they be debate, cinema, music, or other activities. For instance, this is evident in the youth centre “Alter Art” in Travnik, where young people have come together since 1995, as musicians in the first place. Although the centre does not necessarily see itself as a space of resistance, it nevertheless serves as a creative place in which ‘expression without restrictions’ is possible.<sup>21</sup> This happens less specifically through political action, but represents an attempt to restore the politically lost freedom through creative activities around the needs of the surrounding community. It is exactly this notion of freethinking and expression without restrictions that has been missing in the political sphere, which has been seen as constrained and lacking trust on the part of the population.<sup>22</sup> Against this background, the ambition of cultural centres to re-politicise social discourses,<sup>23</sup> or of youth centres to serve as microcosms of cooperation around particular projects, represent important mobilisation spaces for political action. It was only a matter of time before this kind of hidden political activity would erupt in the public sphere.

## Public protests in BiH

The protests that took place in Sarajevo in early 2008 have introduced a new dynamic, which showed that Bosnians are starting to resist irrationalities imposed by the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA)<sup>24</sup> not only in cultural spaces but also in the public sphere. A number of small-scale workers' protests were held in early-mid 2000s. Even though some of them were even marked with hunger strikes, they received only minimum attention in the media and were to a large extent ignored by political elites. Only gradually workers'

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<sup>20</sup>Katie Hampton, OKC Abrašević, personal interview, Mostar, 18/03/10.

<sup>21</sup>Darko Saracevic, personal interview, Travnik, 02/03/11.

<sup>22</sup>Chandler, David (2006), “Building trust in public institutions? Good governance and anti-corruption in Bosnia-Herzegovina”, *Ethnopolitics*, Vol.5 (1), pp. 85-99.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Kappler, Stefanie, “Everyday legitimacy in post-conflict spaces: The creation of social legitimacy in Bosnia-Herzegovina’s cultural arenas”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 7(1), 11-28, 2013.

<sup>24</sup>See, for example, Sumantra Bose, *Bosnia after Dayton: Nationalist partition and international intervention*, London: Hurst & Co., 2002; Roberto Belloni, *State Building and International Intervention in Bosnia*, New York: Routledge, 2007.



frustrations merged with frustrations of the pensioners and the youth – who never even had a chance to find work, as the number of opportunities for employment have been very low.<sup>25</sup>

These cumulating frustrations came to the fore at the beginning of 2008. In February, Sarajevo experienced a wave of juvenile crimes, which culminated in the murder of 17-year old Denis Mrnjavac. This triggered a wave of protests, in which several thousands of Sarajevans took part. Initially the protesters demanded the improvement of security for citizens of the city, but the focus quickly shifted on the incompetence of ruling elites and their unwillingness to address issues, which were of importance for the majority of the population. The public was not only disappointed because of the aggravated security situation in the city, but also because of the general socio-economic situation, marked by high unemployment and a lack of prospect for youth – elements that to a significant extent underpinned the wave of juvenile crimes.<sup>26</sup> Protesters demanded the resignation of the Prime minister of the Sarajevo Canton Government and of the Mayor of Sarajevo both of whom denied responsibility, dismissed demands for their resignation and tried to discredit the protesters. In one instance, the prime minister even described the protesters as a 'mob'.<sup>27</sup>

Protest walks went on for weeks along the main streets of Sarajevo, passing by the BiH Presidency, Canton Government, Federation Court and Prosecutor's Office, and Mayor's Office. All protests were marked with chanting of derogatory terms addressed at officials in these institutions. Although the protests were essentially non-violent, they once escalated and led to the throwing of rocks towards the building of the Canton Sarajevo Government. Gradually, however, the initial enthusiasm started to diminish, and three months later the protests completely ceased. It seemed that little changed, apart from the introduction of some short-sighted measures by the Canton Government and its pledges to build more correctional facilities for juveniles. However, in October 2008 the prime minister resigned, citing the poor performance of his political party in the municipal elections. Although never officially admitted, his resignation arrived also because of his mishandling of the protests, and the related decreased popularity of his party. Therefore, even though

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<sup>25</sup>SETimes.com, 'Nezaposlenost omladine postaje ozbiljan problem u jugoistočnoj Evropi', 17 July, 2007, Available at <http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/bs/features/setimes/features/2007/07/17/feature-03>, Accessed on 18 August, 2014.

<sup>26</sup>Radio Free Europe, 'Mladi i nasilje: Problem društva, škole i porodice', 26 October, 2014, <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/mladi-i-nasilje-problem-drustva-skole-i-porodice/26657410.html> Accessed on 29 October, 2014.

<sup>27</sup>Radio Free Europe, 'Političari zakovani za fotelje, 'ostavka' im nije u rječniku', 29 October, 2013, <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/politiciari-zakovani-za-fotelje-ostavka-im-nije-u-rijecniku/25151917.html>, Accessed on 20 August, 2014.

the protests seemed initially unsuccessful, they actually contributed to a significant change in government. The decrease of the popularity of the prime minister continued into the 2010 general elections when his party almost completely dissolved.<sup>28</sup>

As a whole, the main importance of these protests was its long-term nature. First of all, they provided a lesson to citizens and political elites by showing that the opinion of the public mattered and could even contribute to the resignation of the prime minister. Local actors rediscovered the agency at their disposal, the agency that was suffocated by a Byzantine political system and a sense of powerlessness. Protests also set a precedent, which would be followed by citizens in other parts of the country, as following sections will show. Additionally, the non-ethnic cause behind these protests showed that many citizens share the same concerns, and that they identify predatory elites and the misfit policies of the international community as the main immediate causes of their misfortune, rather than people from a different ethnic group.

The non-ethnic nature of the citizens' movement is perhaps best reflected in the protests that took place in Banja Luka (Republika Srpska) in 2012 for the preservation of the 'Pica' park. This park was set to be destroyed because one local businessman, with strong links to local political leaders,<sup>29</sup> planned to build a residential and business complex. The protests soon outgrew their initial cause. The declaration of the informal citizen group 'Park je naš' (The park is ours) highlights injustices attributed to political elites, and is worth quoting at some length:

"We come at a time when the ruling oligarchy confirms that we, ordinary people, are the biggest losers of the war and the transition period. Under the disguise of ethnic interest, this oligarchy puts profit above people, personal interest above justice [...] this civil protest, as a manner of political battle, is not only a battle for the Park. It is here that the common sense, dignity and a right to a better life are being defended [...] the system makes us unequal on the basis of our nationality, race, and most of all on the basis of the class and economics. We

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<sup>28</sup>Nezavisne novine, 'Najviše mandata SNSD, SDP i SDA', 4 October, 2010, <http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/bih/Najvise-mandata-za-SNSD-SDP-i-SDA-69614.html> Accessed on 1 September, 2014.

<sup>29</sup>See BHT1, Crta – Političkimagazin, May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTPa78Mp3tc> Accessed on 26 August, 2014.

have become mute, blind, without any rights, scared poor people. Enough of this!”<sup>30</sup>

From May to September 2012 hundreds of Banja Luka citizens participated in protest walks. The walks were held along the main street, passing by administrative buildings of entity and city-level institutions. One of the protesters’ routines was to stop in front of them and shout ‘lopovi’ (thieves). While the park was eventually destroyed and part of the new building constructed, in June 2014 the businessman behind the project was sentenced to imprisonment – in a sense validating the protesters’ claim that the construction was marred by injustice.<sup>31</sup>

Another important protest took place in June 2013. It focused on personal identification numbers and became known as ‘baby revolution’ or ‘baby-lution’.<sup>32</sup> In Bosnia, new-borns are required to have an identification number in order to obtain documents such as birth certificates, medical cards and passports. The Parliamentary Assembly failed to adopt provisions regulating this matter and thus brought issuance of ID numbers to a halt for a few months. Belmina Ibrišević was one of the children born in that period, who needed a passport to travel outside of BiH to get a medical treatment that her life depended on.<sup>33</sup> Political elites ignored calls of her family and of the media to solve the problem and instead saw the issue of identity numbers as a vital national interest, which had to be defended by all means. Meanwhile another child, Berina Hamidović, became the first victim of the ID numbers row. She died on 13 June, just before she turned three months.<sup>34</sup> Mothers decided to act. On 5 June 2013 they showed up in front of the Parliament with their prams and babies and together with 3,000 other citizens formed a chain around the building, with the intention of preventing parliamentarians from leaving it until the new law on ID numbers was adopted. This action brought immense public support for the protesters – demonstrating the presence in the country of a non-ethnic solidarity unseen at a similar scale after the conflict. Even though politicians again tried to defend

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<sup>30</sup>Buka, ‘Deklaracijainicijative “Park je naš”’, 7 September, 2012,

<http://www.6yka.com/novost/28065/deklaracija-inicijative-park-je-nas>. Accessed on 27 August, 2014.

<sup>31</sup>Nezavisne novine, ‘Potvrđena kazna, Mile Radišić odlazi na robiju’, 24 June 2014,

<http://www.nezavisne.com/novosti/hronika/Potvrdjena-kazna-Mile-Radisic-odlazi-na-robiju-250544.html>

<sup>32</sup>Radio Free Europe, ‘Baby-lution’ Protest Continues in Sarajevo’, 11 June, 2013,

<http://www.rferl.org/content/bosnia-protests-newborns/25014099.html> Accessed on 29 August, 2014.

<sup>33</sup>Balkan Insight, Elvira M. Jukic, ‘Bosnia’s Feuding Leaders Give Ground on ID Row’, 5 June, 2013,

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/lack-of-personal-numbers-law-threats-bosnian-newborn-s-life>

Accessed on 19 August, 2014.

<sup>34</sup>Oslobođenje, ‘U Beogradu umrla Berina Hamidović, beba bez JMBG broja’, 16 June, 2013,

<http://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/bih/u-beogradu-umrla-berina-hamidovic-beba-bez-maticnog-broja>, Accessed on 19 August, 2014.

their actions with reference to national/ethnic causes, they eventually adopted a new version of the Law, which enabled the issuance of ID numbers.<sup>35</sup>

Apart from demonstrating through protests, Bosnians have also exercised their voting rights to bring about significant changes in the 2010 elections. The Social-Democratic Party (SDP), which declared itself as non-nationalistic and focused on socio-economic issues rather than identity ones, received the majority of votes. The 2010 elections showed that despite the Dayton-based constitution entrenched ethnic divisions, nationalist politics, corruption and patronage, some electoral change was possible. However, soon after the elections expectations of change via institutional means were disappointed. SDP politicians used the flawed political system to do what parties before them had done; striving to remain in power in order to enrich themselves and their affiliates.<sup>36</sup> This, combined with a worsening economic situation in the country led to a climax of discontent, which exploded in protests in February 2014.

Led by laid-off factory workers, the protests began in Tuzla and were met with a brutal response from the police, provoking public outcry.<sup>37</sup> The protests quickly spread to other major urban centres in BiH<sup>38</sup> and some governmental buildings were set on fire, including the building of the Canton Sarajevo Government, but also buildings of canton governments in Zenica, Tuzla, and Mostar. Three days into the protests governments of Zenica-Doboj Canton, Tuzla Canton, and Sarajevo Canton resigned. They were followed by the resignation of the Una-Sana Canton Government a few days later. The protests quickly evolved into plenums, which were informal citizen councils established throughout the Federation of BiH. The citizens who took part in plenums came from all walks of life; workers, pensioners, grassroots activists, artists, students and the unemployed were all involved in plenums. There was no formal leadership, but the organization of plenum activities rested on people who demonstrated the best organising skills and who had ideas on how plenums should be shaped. Plenum sessions comprised two parts. In the first part, citizens had a chance to voice their concerns and requests - for such a long time ignored by the political elites and by international interveners. Everyone was given three minutes to

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<sup>35</sup> Al Jazeera, 'Parlament BiH hitno usvojio zakon o JMB', 18 July, 2013, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/parlament-bih-hitno-usvojio-zakon-o-jmbg> , Accessed on 26 August, 2014. Unfortunately, it was too late for Belmina Ibrišević, who died in October, 2013 in a hospital in Germany.

<sup>36</sup> Deutsche Welle, 'Još jedna izgubljena godina', 25 December, 2012, <http://www.dw.de/jo%C5%A1-jedna-izgubljena-godina/a-16472866> Accessed on 29 August, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> An enlightening account of the reasons underpinning social and economic discontent, written by one participant, can be found in Emina Busuladžić, "Why?", in Damir Arsenijević, ed., *Unbriable Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Fight for the Commons*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2014, pp. 11- 26.

<sup>38</sup> Contrary to the widely held belief that protests have only erupted in the Federation of BiH, small-scale protests also occurred in Republika Srpska.

do so. In the second part, the most common requests were adopted by plenums and sent to various levels and branches of government, demanding their immediate action.<sup>39</sup> Eventually, the requests of all plenums were merged and submitted to the Government of the Federation of BiH. From these requests it emerged that citizens were mainly concerned about issues linked to the appalling state of social justice in the country, including labour rights, 'thieving privatization', welfare and healthcare.<sup>40</sup>

These protests signal that citizens are breaking out of the vicious cycle imposed on them by a political system unresponsive to their demands and are demanding and beginning to implement a kind of peace in accordance with their history, culture and needs. By contrast, international NGOs, civil society actors often engineered by internationals, have failed to offer support to plenums or to even sympathise with their cause.<sup>41</sup> The protesters have even called to condemn internationally-funded NGOs because they are seen as tied to the status quo and to the (nationalist) stance that "there is no alternative" to ethnic politics, nationalism, patronage and clientelism.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly the mainstream media, which after the war were heavily targeted by the international community, played a negative role during protests and plenums. There were very few media outlets providing accurate reports of the evolving situation. Much of the media served the political elites to spin the protests towards their agenda. In Republika Srpska, some media outlets published stories on the alleged, and unfounded, arming of protesters, with the aim of preparing an attack on Republika Srpska.<sup>43</sup> In the Federation the media reported President Izetbegović's unverified claim that 12 kilograms of drugs had been found among the protesters, only to clarify later that the drugs were actually seized by the police in an unrelated operation.

Additionally, some political parties tried to hijack plenums and protests in order to present themselves as the new emerging subject, who could replace the old, corrupt one. Members of political parties infiltrated plenums either to make sure that they could be seen as leaders of changes or to undermine the plenums. The pressure from political parties

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<sup>39</sup>Oslobođenje, 'Građani predali zahtjeve Skupštini KS: Ukinuti "bijeli hljeb" i beneficije', 18 February, 2014, <http://www.oslobodjenje.ba/vijesti/sarajevo/gradjani-predali-zahtjeve-skupstini-ks-ukinuti-bijeli-hljeb-i-beneficije>, Accessed on 30 August, 2014.

<sup>40</sup>See Plenum građana i građanki Sarajeva, 'Zahtjevi Plenuma građana i građanki Sarajeva prema Skupštini Kantona Sarajevo', <http://plenumsa.org/zahtjevi-plenuma-gradana-i-gradanki-sarajeva-prema-skupstini-kantona-sarajevo/> (Accessed 8 August, 2014).

<sup>41</sup>Interviews with participants of the Sarajevo plenum.

<sup>42</sup>Damir Arsenijević, "Protests and Plenums: The Struggle for the Commons," in Damir Arsenijević, ed., *Unbriable Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Fight for the Commons*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014, p. 48.

<sup>43</sup>Press RS, 'Demonstrantima obećano oružje za napad na RS', 11 February, 2014; [http://pressrs.ba/sr/vesti/vesti\\_dana/story/54891/Demonstrantima+obe%C4%87ano+oru%C5%BEje+za+napad+na+RS!.html](http://pressrs.ba/sr/vesti/vesti_dana/story/54891/Demonstrantima+obe%C4%87ano+oru%C5%BEje+za+napad+na+RS!.html) Accessed on 23 August, 2014.

was also manifested in the fact that some participants of plenums were coerced into abandoning them.<sup>44</sup> Party members threatened participants with loss of their jobs, with sending inspections to close their businesses, or with subpoenaing them for hearings to police stations. The attempt to undermine plenums, along with the media harangue, showed how big the stakes for political elites were, and how much they felt threatened by the citizens' actions. As a whole, the pressure that political parties exercised succeeded in decreasing the number of citizens attending plenum sessions, which gradually faded away.

Overall, the achievements that came with this round of protests, and with plenums, showed the growing re-politicisation of the public sphere and influence of citizens. Apart from the immediate results evident in governments' resignations, the protests provided a clear warning for political elites. They showed that public opinion matters much more than it did before 2008, when protests in BiH had (re)surfaced in the public realm. Protests demonstrated that citizens are becoming more organized in terms of articulating their requests and resistance to the limitations of the liberalized political system. The establishment of plenums which provided a venue that citizens could use to voice their concerns and a medium through which they could take their concerns to appropriate institutions. Additionally protests, along with plenums, reiterated the importance of non-ethnic concerns among the population of the country, which is the main reason why they were met with approval throughout the country.<sup>45</sup> More broadly, the heterogeneous group of the protesters and their supporters demanded nothing less than a new way of doing politics based on a shared concern and responsibility for the 'commons' and attention to socio-economic issues.<sup>46</sup> As a whole, perhaps the greatest achievement of the February 2014 protests is the newly found sense that "change" might be difficult, painful, and slow to come, but is possible.

#### **4. Local Agency and International Intervention**

High Representative of the International Community Valentin Inzko expressed well the discomfort common among international officials about the February 2014 protests when he suggested that, should the situation escalate, it might be necessary to send EU-troops

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<sup>44</sup>Confidential interview with members of the Sarajevo Plenum, 20 August, 2014.

<sup>45</sup>Klix.ba, 'Većina građana podržava proteste, a nasilje predstavlja preveliku cijenu promjena', 12 February, 2014, <http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/vecina-gradjana-podrzava-proteste-a-nasilje-predstavlja-preveliku-cijenu-promjena/140212119> Accessed on 22 August, 2014.

<sup>46</sup>Damir Arsenjivić, ed., *Unbriable Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Fight for the Commons*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2014.



to pacify trouble areas.<sup>47</sup> This initial reaction was soon qualified in favour of an expression towards the citizens' right to protest peacefully, but nonetheless the reference to armed intervention revealed a profound confusion about the nature of the protest and how to address citizens' demands. More than anything else, this type of statement highlighted two long-lasting, and problematic, priorities among international officials in their dealings with Bosnia.

First, the international community has placed ethnic security at the top of its post-Dayton priorities – thus marginalizing other concerns and values, including justice, economic and social rights and, above all, the promotion of non-nationalist politics. No doubt, this prioritization has been largely due to the horrors of the war in the 1990s, and the related concern to avoid a relapse into conflict. At the same time, however, western anxieties about violence reflect a deeply ingrained orientalist or, to cite Maria Todorova, balkanist orientation towards the region.<sup>48</sup> This orientation plays into the hands of ethno-nationalist leaders who have been simultaneously working to preserve ethnic divisions while presenting themselves as the solution to the problems they contribute to create. In suggesting the possibility that the EU could intervene to re-establish order and security, Inzko inevitably sided with the supporters of the status quo, that is, the very same nationalist elites Bosnian citizens have been protesting against.

Second, and consequently, by accepting and accommodating distinct ethnic identities, the international community has primarily focused on stability instead of change.<sup>49</sup> Although international officials have frequently called upon Bosnian citizens to “make change happen” by rejecting nationalist programs and worldviews at the polls (and, by extension, in every political, economic and social sphere) they have nonetheless been the staunchest guarantors of the nationalist ethnic (dis)order that emerged at Dayton. Not only have they stood behind the unresponsive, fragmented, and ethnically based constitutional framework drafted by international lawyers, but also they have contributed to the consolidation of nationalist power by turning a blind eye to the misuse of international aid and resources.<sup>50</sup> As a result of this simultaneous, paradoxical role of both critics of ethno-nationalism and supporters of those structures and practices feeding ethno-

<sup>47</sup> Inzko: “EU-Truppen, wenn die Lage eskaliert,” *Kurier*, 8 February 2014, interview available at <http://kurier.at/politik/ausland/valentin-inzko-eu-truppen-wenn-die-lage-eskaliert/50.439.268>

<sup>48</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, updated edition.

<sup>49</sup> Laurence Cooley, “The European Union’s Approach to Conflict Resolution: Insights from the Constitutional Reform Process in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Comparative European Politics*, 11 (2), 2013, pp. 172-200.

<sup>50</sup> Roberto Belloni & Francesco Strazzari, “Corruption in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo: A Deal Among Friends,” *Third World Quarterly*, 35 (5), 2014, pp. 132-148.

nationalist politics, international officials have failed to listen and relate to Bosnian citizens. They have blamed citizens for not abandoning their nationalist leaders altogether – thus not recognising that support for ethno-nationalist parties has been a rational response to a condition of fragmentation and fear.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps most importantly, when Bosnians have expressed clear non-nationalist views and demands, as with the February 2014 protests and in a variety of other instances described above, they have either ignored those demands or interpreted them as a threat to stability, rather than an opportunity for progressive change.

This inability to recognize and support non-nationalist views has characterised the international community's approach to Bosnia. Most international observers, journalists and, above all, civil servants and diplomats have focused their analysis of and approach to intervention relying on ethnic and national categories.<sup>52</sup> For example, in commenting the February 2014 revolts, Inzko pointed out how "Muslims" were primarily involved. By so doing, Inzko involuntarily validated Bosnian leaders' self-serving claim that the protests should have been understood as an ethnic problem caused by "hooligans" on the orders of other ethnic groups, and not as a social and economic one motivated by corruption and misrule. Faced with mounting criticism about his inability to interpret and act upon the situation, Inzko rectified his views claiming that "protests are not about who is a Bosniak, Croat, a Serb or an Other... [they are] about jobs and a normal, dignified life for all."<sup>53</sup> While this correction belatedly stated the obvious, it did little to restore legitimacy for international officials, who are widely perceived as being either complicit with ethno-nationalists, or aloof and unable to address citizens' needs and demands.

More broadly, the February 2014 protests revealed the bankruptcy of the international strategy based on an economic and political liberalization formula. Neo-liberal restructuring is frequently criticized for privileging the few through privatization and austerity programs, and for failing to sustain economic recovery – in Bosnia as elsewhere. Less noticed upon is the important role micro-finance has assumed within neo-liberal economic programs. International interveners consider micro-finance as one of the most promising tool to unleash individual entrepreneurship while, in a neo-liberal fashion, making redundant state responses to poverty alleviation. Despite high expectation, however, IMF

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<sup>51</sup> John W. Hulse, "Why Did They Vote for Those Guys Again? Challenges and Contradictions in the Promotion of Political Moderation in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Democratization*, 17 (6), 2010, pp. 1132-1152.

<sup>52</sup> David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity and Justice in Bosnia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

<sup>53</sup> Oslobođenje: Interview with HR Valentin Inzko, 16 February 2014, available at: [http://www.ohr.int/ohr-dept/press/pressi/default.asp?content\\_id=48419](http://www.ohr.int/ohr-dept/press/pressi/default.asp?content_id=48419)



and World Bank micro-credit schemes have had a destructive economic and social impact on Bosnia – contributing to plunge a growing number of people into poverty, and to create the conditions for the sudden outbreak of citizens' dissatisfaction – as in February 2014.

The microfinance sector appeared to have an initial degree of success by mid-2000s, when nearly 400,000 microloans were granted. However, loans mostly underpinned consumption spending, led to growing individual over-indebtedness, and eventually ensued in the closing of microfinance institutions<sup>54</sup> and the collapse of the micro-finance sector. As a result, “many ordinary Bosnian people... feel that they have effectively been abused by the microfinance industry, not assisted to better their lives.”<sup>55</sup> The impact on women has been especially damaging. In a country where a woman heads one in four households, microfinance was expected to contribute not only to economic recovery and development but also to gender emancipation. Instead, women's engagement with microcredit contributed to their growing indebtedness, increasing default, and exposure to the humiliating court process required to sign off on their loans.

The neo-liberal reformist zeal in the political-institutional arena similarly ended with a failure to achieve significant changes and improvements. For several years after the end of the war international officials engaged in assertive intervention imposing legislation, removing obstructionist elected Bosnian officials and building a bureaucratic state apparatus. While this bold, forceful style achieved undeniable short-term positive results, it had a limited effect on both underlying power structures and citizens' daily struggle to make ends meet. Bosnians seemed to have barely noticed international efforts. Significantly, the early 2014 protests and plenums did not even address any of their demands to international institutions. While the protesters' choice to focus their attention on local authorities undoubtedly reflected a negative assessment of the work of international organizations in BiH, it also confirmed an engrained attitude deriving from Bosnians' long co-existence with foreign rule. During about 4 centuries (1463-1878) they had lived as the westernmost province of the Ottomans Empire and later, for four decades (1878-1918), as a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In large measure, while formally ruled by others, Bosnians of all faiths have generally been self-governing in day-to-day affairs. According to historian Emily Greble, while not displaying particular forms of

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, [www.kiva.org/partners/101](http://www.kiva.org/partners/101)

<sup>55</sup> Milford Bateman, Dean Sinković, Marinko Škare, *Bosnia's Microfinance Meltdown*, American Economics Association Annual Conference, Chicago, January 6-8, 2012, p. 6.

insolence or disrespect, "Sarajevans' customary response to foreign rulers [was] ignoring them."<sup>56</sup>

Given this type of response it is unsurprising that the international imposition of a variety of measures on Bosnia has left most citizens fairly indifferent. The internationally perceived need to reach out to wider sectors of the population in order to favour domestic legitimacy of internationally sponsored institutions has led to a change of strategy. Since at least 2003, when the European Union solemnly and emphatically promised that the future of the region, including that of Bosnia, lies in the progressive integration into European institutions, international officials laboured to support domestic change without imposing it. Despite its persisting orientalist underpinnings reflected in the need of continuing external assistance and guidance embedded in the process,<sup>57</sup> Europeanization was expected to lead to the (more or less) voluntary adoption of liberal-democratic reforms by local elites without blatant top-down impositions by international officials.

But even such a strategy has failed to deliver change. The lure of getting closer to Europe has not convinced Bosnian elites of the need to abandon the most debatable ethnic-guarantees, frequently turned into privileges for personal gain, and to reform their Byzantine, rights-violating constitution. In February 2014, as protests were breaking out in several Bosnian towns, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Stefan Füle held unproductive meetings with party leaders in Sarajevo, but ignored the citizen plenums, only to announce a few days later that negotiations to amend the constitution in line with the European Court of Human Rights 'Sejdic-Finci ruling failed'.<sup>58</sup> This fiasco was only the last one in a series of international attempts to mediate among the parties and achieve the modification of the Bosnian Constitution to comply with EU standards and legislation. As a whole, neo-liberal institution building has not led to the creation of an accountable state responsive to citizens' needs. Perhaps more damaging for Bosnian citizens, institution building has played into the hands of predatory Bosnian elites who have been able to hijack the reform process to preserve their control over their respective constituencies, and to take economic advantage from opportunities arising from the never-ending transition from war to a market democracy. As a participant in the 2014 events put it, expressing the views of many protesters, "the so-called post-socialist

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<sup>56</sup> Emily Greble, *Sarajevo, 1941-1945: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Hitler's Europe*, Ithaca/New York, Cornell University Press, 2011, p. 63.

<sup>57</sup> Tanja Petrovic, Thinking Europe without Thinking: Neo-colonial Discourse on and in the Western Balkans, *Eurozine*, September 2011, available at <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2011-09-22-petrovic-en.html>

<sup>58</sup> Elvira M. Jukic, "Füle Blames Bosnian Leaders for Rights Logjam," *Balkan Insight*, 18 February 2014, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/no-results-in-rights-ruling-meeting-in-sarajevo>

transition to liberal democracy has been experienced as a never-ending story of looting”<sup>59</sup> within which ordinary citizens are stuck between a traumatic violent past and a future which still has to start – as expressed by the staging of “Waiting for Godot” mentioned above.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted that, with the arrival of the (neo-)liberal peace, the end of history has by no means been achieved.<sup>60</sup> Politics thrives in post-intervention Bosnia, and the international community continues to play a crucial if not always positive role. What is encouraging, however, is the fact that the 2014 protests have given voice to a previously-hidden political agenda, which springs from the concrete needs of the population rather than from an ethno-nationalist discourse. The protests may have become less visible over time, but they persist and are striving for structures of accountability which the international community had been unable to create in their twenty years of engagement. It was citizens’ initiatives that challenged the kind of peace born out of the Dayton Agreement, which in turn raises questions about the legitimacy of intervention, as well as the real meaning of local ownership, beyond the top-down control mechanisms of seemingly bottom-up initiatives. Hence, the protests have cast light on a marginalised type of agency which has claimed back the ownership of peace on its own terms. It remains to be seen where this will lead as well as the contestations involved in this process, but an important avenue has opened which might eventually challenge the participatory potential of Western democracies themselves.<sup>61</sup> What is clear is that, successfully or not, such dynamics of peace formation challenge the peace infrastructure created in Bosnia-Herzegovina and beyond, whilst pointing to the ever-present but often-overlooked potential of non-professionals to equip peace with meaningful content.

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<sup>59</sup> Haris Husarić, “February Awakening: Breaking with the Political Legacy of the last 20 Years,” in Damir Arsenijević, ed, *Unbriable Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Fight for the Commons*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2014, p. 67.

<sup>60</sup> Fukuyama, Francis, *The end of History and the Last Man*, Penguin, New Ed edition, 1993.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Jansen, Stef (2014) Can the Revolt in Bosnia and Herzegovina Send a Message To the Wider World? Available from: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/blog/can-the-revolt-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-send-a-message-to-the-wider-world> [Accessed 13th February 2014].

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